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ABSTRACT

The Learning Skills Center (LSC) of Whatcom, Washington, Community College is a service, not a place. The college campus is the whole county and the LSC is offered in more than one location in the county. The disadvantages of the scattered-campus LSC include complicated decentralized record-keeping, the necessity of duplicated services and personnel, and the complexities of supervising and coordinating operations at several locations. However, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The public supports and appreciates services brought close to them. The duplication of services means the student has an opportunity to be exposed to different personalities and methods of teaching. The public benefits from the need to hire extra paraprofessionals in the various centers. Graduate credit given by a nearby state university for tutoring in the program provides an opportunity for practical experience in adult education. The variety of teaching guarantees flexibility and creativity. Holding classes in buildings other than school buildings often has a beneficial effect for students with negative feelings toward school systems. Finally, the teachers and administrators in a college without a campus feel a great deal of responsibility for the success of the students and the system. (TO)

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THE REALITIES OF A LEARNING SKILLS CENTER IN A COLLEGE WITHOUT A CAMPUS

Recently in a conversation between a couple of educators concerning the book Jonathan Livingston Seagull, one person quipped, "A seagull is nothing but an elegant bird wading around in a lot of garbage."

In applying that to education, it seems to me there are many elegant birds still wading around in garbage. Many federal and state programs have originated on soaring wings of idealism, only to become more or less earthbound in the garbage of mismanagement, tied-up funds, and political maneuvers.

At Whatcom Community College there is a special kind of state program, so far managing to stay free of most of the traditional garbage. Our college without a campus, the newest district in Washington State, is "still relatively unencumbered by continuing programs and methods that might be more responsive or that should be modified or cancelled." (1) And there is every intention to keep it that way.

Not having a campus means that there is no specific location known as the campus, that the campus is the whole county. The administrative offices are in a county location, while two instructional

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centers are in two separate towns. Other instructional centers will be added later in other parts of the county. WCC has made a commitment to the taxpayers not to build or to buy buildings. Property is rented, borrowed, leased or renovated instead.

Another commitment that WCC has made to the taxpayer is that central to the college's instructional approach will be faculty "open to uncommon modes of instruction and learning: independent study, individual study, programmed study, use of radio and television, challenge tests or performances..., etc." (2) Along with this, WCC's goal is to make the classroom the exception, rather than the rule.

What does this type of organization and philosophy mean to the concept of the Learning Skills Center (which, in spite of its pinfeathers, is already in danger of becoming bogged down in stereotyped definitions)? First of all, this means that the Learning Skills Center must be thought of as a service, not a place on a campus. That service will be offered in more than one location in the county. This philosophy is in direct contrast to those centers which are established on campuses, and then at some point, branch out to offer satellite services elsewhere.

Almost immediately, there are several challenges which present themselves because of this uniqueness. WCC's operation does not fit into the traditional state system for funding. This causes delays and

other complications in budgeting. Funding is perhaps the major challenge to WCC at this point, but adequate funding will allow learning skill services to be immediately available to any student in the county.

The traditional school experience of students and faculty may require them to do some adjusting to the idea of a Learning Skills Center which is not a place, but a service. WCC hopes to give them new symbols for identity to replace the traditional symbols of buildings and a campus. Since part of the challenge to the faculty is how to have college identity while working in some isolated place, the Learning Skills Center must provide a basic supporting action to the teaching program wherever classes are. Having one service program common to all facets of the curriculum will provide a method of communication which can be used to weld together diverse areas. Counseling easily available for students both in subject-matter areas and in personal areas can be the uniting factor for teacher and student as they make use of the Center.

Learning Skills Center budgeting for this service means finding a way to duplicate materials and staff, and a way to deliver services on an emergency basis. Record-keeping for Learning Skills Center services in a decentralized situation becomes a complicated process, and the coordinator of the Learning Skills Center must oversee operations at several locations instead of one. We know that without skillful coordination, there may be a splintering of quality in the name of flexibility. This is our challenge.

The advantages for a Learning Skills Center in a scattered campus outweigh the disadvantages. The public supports the idea of a college which doesn't require an expensive outlay for buildings, and they appreciate the fact that services are brought close to them.

A duplication of services means the student has an opportunity to be exposed to different personalities and methods in teaching, and the public benefits from the necessity to hire extra paraprofessionals in the various centers. Also, graduate credit given by a nearby state college or university for tutoring in the program (Western Washington State College provides tutors for WCC's Reading Program), or credit given by the college in which the tutoring is taking place, provides an opportunity for some practical experience in the exciting new field of adult education. It also solves some budget problems.

This variety of teaching provides "new blood" for the Learning Skills Center system, and guarantees an on-going flexibility. This also guarantees against the "empire building" that often happens in a one-location, one-staff operation. The very nature of this type of operation demands a constant search for new approaches, new material, and new creativity to meet local needs. It also avoids serving the needs of only a few near-by agencies, while ignoring those in outlying communities.

Holding classes in buildings other than school buildings often has a beneficial effect for those who feel "turned off" by school systems, symbolized by their buildings. WCC has held classes in churches, fire halls, armed forces buildings, YWCA facilities, and farm feed stores, as well as school buildings.

The teacher in a college without a campus may very well be caught up in the excitement of a really new educational enterprise, thereby making heroic efforts to overcome the inevitable problems of the system. In the Learning Skills Center program he will often donate hours of his free time to learn about new ideas and materials. Working within this unique philosophy means that responsibility for knowing what is going

on and what can be done for his students, and for seeing that the information is passed on to the student, falls directly on the teacher. There are some teachers who can accept the challenge, some who can't.

Finally, the administrators in a college without a campus have to be dedicated to its philosophy to a point beyond belief. They have to be dedicated to a long-range dream of retaining only what seems to be valid community needs in education, and to searching for and implementing what seems valid in innovative education. The Learning Skills Center finds itself undergirded and supported in a way not possible in more traditionally structured systems.

The Learning Skills Center at WCC is unique in all the ways already mentioned. It is also unique in some more specific ways. WCC has a goal to make the classroom an exception, rather than the rule. As a result of our attempting to provide for non-traditional needs in the community, we find ourselves working hand-in-glove with such programs as the Interdisciplinary Studies Program (social studies, natural science, humanities, and communications totally integrated under the theme of environment - that environment being individual, social, and natural), the New Careers Program (providing on job-training and a two-year college degree for positions, such as Center aides, within the system), the Lummi Indian Project (providing special educational services to the Indians in cooperation with the government), a new adult high school Diploma program (where credit is given for knowledge and experience, not time spent in classes necessarily), a staff improvement program for the secretarial pool, work with the educable retarded, a look at what we can do to provide some basic skill services for the local jails, and a whole new package of non-traditional studies (overseas study, radio and

TV courses, etc.) Thus, the classroom is giving way to such locations as a foreign country, on the job, observation posts, a student's home, or an office.

In a search for new methods and research in adult education, our Learning Skills Center finds itself involved in such projects as the HUMRRO (Human Resource Research Organization) project in inquiry-centered learning, which attempts to determine whether this type of learning can be generated a high percentage of the time by setting up carefully structured problem-solving situations.

Also, a research project involving our reading program is an attempt on the part of our tutors to identify the individual adult student's own method of problem solving, then using it to teach reading. We have decided to let this project run for two terms before coming to any major conclusions. Our reading program is also attempting to develop a core of good adult reading materials.

Often we have to create our own instructional packets, because other materials aren't available. In doing so, and by trial and error, we have finally reached the conclusion that skills, except reading, are easily taught, comparatively, in instructional packets and programmed materials. Subject matter, such as history and literature, are not. Only the sharp, well adjusted student can grasp much of real importance in subject matter without some group discussion along the way. This presents some problems with individualized, self-paced, "any time" programs.

Our individualized self-paced, "any time" programs are unique in other ways. The Learning Skills Centers themselves are not classrooms, but areas where individualized studies take place. Even in classes taken for college or high school credit, the student enters with a set of

goals designed only for him. When those goals are completed to the satisfaction of the teacher, the credit is earned. It may have taken the student one term, two terms, or one-half term; attendance is not important in credit evaluation. This places the responsibility for making major decisions about his own life directly on the student, one of the major goals of our programs.

This concept of credit in the Center may mean that more counseling than teaching is done with a given student, especially with the young high school student who may lack the maturity to easily accept this kind of responsibility. Most older students work well in this kind of situation.

WCC likes to think that not only is its Learning Skills Center a service instead of a place, but also that it is a developmental service instead of a remedial service. In fact, we call ourselves the Developmental Center. This encourages students at all levels of learning, from all programs, and from all segments of the community to use our services without feeling a stigma attached to the experience.

So our college without a campus has many realities that differ from the traditional educational system. There are some challenges for the Developmental Center and its students. However, the many advantages in such a system, and the creativity which is an inevitable result, keep our elegant bird air-borne. The decentralized aspect becomes a many-splendored thing for those involved, whether student, teacher, counselor, or coordinator.

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